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Mr. Sessions Leaves the FBI

WILLIAM S. Sessions has done some courageous and upright things at the FBI, yet he has also done things wrong as the controversies in which he is embroiled heated up, and President Clinton had a case for dismissing him as director. Superficially, the grounds for removal were contained in the accusations of ethical misconduct launched against him last January by William P. Barr, then the outgoing attorney general. The Barr memorandum is an extraordinarily vindictive document, written to do a maximum amount of damage to Mr. Sessions's reputation with a minimum amount of evidence. But even when you brush away the trivia and overstatement, there remains a residue of poor judgment. It reflects imprudence on Mr. Sessions's part.

The deeper issues, which had less attention, are as important. It seems clear that Mr. Sessions no longer had reliable control over the bureau. Regardless of how the process that led to this got its early start, it was a dangerous situation. Some of the tensions between Mr. Sessions and the organization he has headed were to his credit. He tried hard to improve the standing of blacks and other minorities, and that hasn't always been popular. Some of the trouble was symbolic, such as the degree to which his wife accompanied him as he went about the business of a high-security, quasi-military organization. For many reasons, Mr. Sessions was no longer an effective leader. He succumbed to the bureaucratic temptation and let himself indulge the resentments and grievances and reciprocated slights that are the awful stuff of office politics, the back and forth that no one ever really wins. In the course of this he paid a large price in personal dignity and confidence within the bureau and alienated more of his employees. He lost the support of those at the bureau who might have been inclined to take his side. He could not exercise authority there.

Somewhere in the depths of this affair lies the BNL scandal—the case of the Italian bank that lent those billions to Iraq under very peculiar circumstances. The Justice Department (under Mr. Barr) first leaked word of its investigation into Mr. Sessions's ethical conduct one weekend last fall, two days after Mr. Sessions had forthrightly announced an inquiry into the department's strange—and still unexplained—conduct in the BNL case. The charges that Mr. Barr launched against Mr. Sessions in January have a strong smell of retaliation for having embarrassed the Bush administration during the election campaign. But however squalid the impulse that ignored these matters until the director crossed the department—and only *then* went public with them—it is the charges themselves that have to be addressed. Attorney General Reno concluded from her study of those charges and Mr. Sessions's response that some of the allegations were true and reflected ill on a chief law enforcement official.

Mr. Sessions fears that his removal, halfway through his statutory 10-year term, may threaten to politicize the job and the organization. But a kind of politicization has already occurred: In all this turmoil and potshotting, the FBI has wandered deep into the jungles of a particularly unforgiving kind of politics. It's going to take somebody else to lead the FBI out of the woods with its reputation and its effectiveness intact.